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SUBJECT: UN COMMEMORATION OF 60 YEARS OF UNRWA

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: The commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the founding of United National Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) special high-level meeting of the General Assembly took place at UN headquarters September 24, 2009. The event was an opportunity for UN member states and representatives of the UN community to recognize the work of UNRWA over the past six decades and to discuss challenges UNRWA faces in the implementation of its mandate. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas delivered an address focused on the Palestinian "right of return" as laid out in UN General Assembly Resolution (GA Res) 194. UN Secretary General (SYG) Ban suggested that the General Assembly review UNRWA's budgeting, as currently only a small percentage is allocated from the UN regular budget with the rest provided by voluntary contributions. Members of the Arab group used the meeting to reiterate support for right of return under GA Res 194 and to accuse Israel of attacks targeting UNRWA. Portugal, current chair of the Western Europe and others group (WEOG), and the United States both expressed support for UNRWA and noted regret that Israel was denied a speaking role at the event. Representatives of the five regional groups, the EU Presidency (Sweden), and the European Commission focused on commemorating UNRWA's work and the need to provide the agency with adequate resources. The high-level speakers' event was preceded by a panel debate and remarks by President of the General Assembly Dr. Ali Treki and UNRWA Commissioner-General Karen AbuZayd. End Summary.

Abbas' Remarks

¶2. (SBU) Palestinian Authority President Abbas expressed deep gratitude for the support and assistance of UNRWA to Palestinian refugees. He said the anniversary was a time to renew commitment to a "just, agreed and lasting solution to the plight of the Palestine refugees, in accordance with international law and UN resolutions." Noting that more than half of the Palestinian people worldwide - 4.7 million - are refugees, Abbas said that "the Palestinian people remain a stateless and oppressed people, still suffering from the grave injustice inflicted upon them in the 1948 Al-Nakba." Praising UNRWA's assistance as invaluable, especially in periods of crisis, Abbas highlighted, "the brutal Israeli military aggression against our people in the Gaza Strip" adding that they "continue to suffer tremendously under the collective punishment of the inhuman Israeli blockade." Abbas accused Israel of deliberately attacking UNRWA facilities, "including schools where civilians were known to be sheltering." While calling for a return to the peace process, Abbas asserted, "Israel's security is linked to our independence and to our security, and the continuation of the occupation and Al-Nakba does not bring security to anyone."

(Comment: Abbas' mentioned GA Res 194 four times during his speech. Palestinian contacts said that highlighting GA Res 194 shows Palestinians that Abbas' remains committed to the "right of return." End comment)

UN and UNRWA officials

¶ 13. (SBU) GA President Treki noted that the resolution that established UNRWA was adopted in 1949 without opposition and that the General Assembly offers, "near universal support for UNRWA's work and renewing its mandate." (Note: While the U.S. fully supports UNRWA, it regularly abstains or votes against UNRWA-related resolutions as they contain politically-charged language that seeks to prejudice the outcome of final status negotiations. End note.) Treki praised UNRWA's local staff's "extraordinary dedication to UN principles, upholding humanitarian impartiality towards all parties to the conflict, often in the face of violence directly affecting their families." Speaking off-script, Treki expressed hope that Palestinian refugees would be able to soon return to their homeland. UNRWA Commissioner-General AbuZayd called for additional financial support, and commented, "The protracted exile of Palestine refugees and the dire conditions they endure, particularly in the occupied Palestinian territory, cannot be reconciled with State obligations under the United Nations Charter." AbuZayd continued, "UNRWA stands ready to play its constructive and enabling role to ensure that the Palestine refugee voice is heard and that their interests and choices are reflected in any future agreement." AbuZayd highlighted UNRWA's work in

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providing humanitarian assistance and human development to members of a future Palestinian state. SYG Ban honored the work of UNRWA, and suggested that the General Assembly review UNRWA's budgeting, as currently only a small percentage is allocated from the UN regular budget with the rest provided by voluntary contributions. He said that the Agency is too important to suffer "budget crisis after budget crisis." Ban expressed support for President Obama's efforts for a resumption of negotiations towards a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Regional Group Statements

¶ 14. (SBU) With the notable exception of Algeria, representatives of the five regional groups, the EU Presidency (Sweden), and the European Commission all delivered remarks focused on commemorating UNRWA's work and the need to provide the agency with adequate resources. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Guyana Rodrigues-Birkett, on behalf of the group of Latin American and Caribbean States (GRULAC), called UNRWA an important contribution to peace and stability in the region. Japanese Foreign Minister Okada, speaking on behalf of the Asia Group, underlined Japan's contributions to UNRWA and the Palestinian people totaling to more than one billion dollars since 1993. Poland's Deputy Foreign Minister Bernatowicz expressed the Eastern European Group's appreciation for UNRWA and noted that the agency has "evolved from a relief and resettlement organization to one focused on relief and development." Portuguese Minister of State and Foreign Affairs Amado delivered the WEOG statement, which noted "The State of Israel, a concerned party, requested the opportunity to address you today from this podium. The WEOG regrets that it was not possible to agree on an appropriate format for its participation." (Note: Reftels describe consideration of Israel's request. End note.) The WEOG statement also called for "unimpeded access for humanitarian aid, including food, fuel, and humanitarian assistance as foreseen in Security Council Resolution 1860."

¶ 15. (SBU) Swedish Minister for International Development

Cooperation Carlsson, speaking on behalf of the EU Presidency, stressed the need for "a fair, stable and equitable solution to the question of Palestine refugees." Noting that limited access constrains UNRWA's ability to fulfill its mandate, she said "The EU calls for the immediate and unconditional opening of crossings for the flow of humanitarian aid, commercials goods and persons to and from Gaza." Sweden said it is unsustainable that ninety percent of the agency's resources are provided by only fifteen countries. Carlsson said that, "Respect for international law including international humanitarian law and human rights law has guided the EU's policy, not only with respect to the conflict between Israel and its neighbors, but also EU support to UNRWA." The European Commission's Deputy Director General for External Relations Mingarelli said that President Obama's address to the UN General Assembly will allow for a return to negotiations. Striking a distinctly different tone, Algeria's Ambassador to the U.S. Abdallah Baali, speaking on behalf of the Africa group, focused his remarks on the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He called for resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue in accordance with international law and the UN charter and noted "the right of return must be part of any fair and definitive settlement."

Arab Group Statements

16. (SBU) MFA Under Secretary for Multilateral Affairs of Saudi Arabia Prince Torki Al Kabir expressed gratitude for all those who had worked to mitigate the suffering of Palestinian refugees. He condemned "recent aggression carried out by Israel on the Gaza Strip" where "the Israeli occupation army launched direct and deliberate strikes on the UNRWA buildings and facilities, ignoring the humanitarian help and aid provided by the agency to Palestinian refugees who are the victim of the Israeli brutal aggression and occupation." He stated Saudi Arabia's contributions to the Palestinian National Authority's budget and UNRWA's budget from 2002-2009 totaled 734.8 million USD. Saying that the international community rejects the policy of settlements and demands its complete cessation, including in East Jerusalem, he called for lifting restrictions placed on UNRWA and its staff and compelling Israel to exempt humanitarian assistance provided by UNRWA from the "exorbitant taxes" it imposes.

17. (SBU) Naela Gabr, Deputy Foreign Minister of Egypt, said that UNRWA provided for the "minimum" needs of Palestinian

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refugees. She called on member states to show their support to the Palestinian people by increasing contributions to UNRWA. Gabr noted the continued decline in humanitarian conditions within the Palestinian territories, compounded in the Gaza by the Israeli blockade. She called the blockade a clear violation of international law, and said that until a just solution could be found in accordance with GA Res 194, Egypt will continue to support the work of UNRWA.

18. (SBU) Jordanian Foreign Minister Judeh expressed strong support for President Obama's efforts to end settlement activity and for a two-state solution to the conflict. Judeh urged the international community to provide financial support to UNRWA. He noted that Jordan, as the country hosting the greatest number of Palestinian refugees, faces financial burdens. He said Israel bears the historic responsibility for the refugee crisis, and recalled the right of host countries to reparations for outlays spent on refugee support. Judeh criticized the suggestion that UNRWA be eliminated and its mandate folded into the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). He reiterated that a settlement to the conflict would need to take into consideration Palestinian rights, including the "right of return."

¶ 9. (SBU) Lebanese Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh noted that the commemoration of UNRWA also marked 60 years of human suffering endured by Palestinian refugees. He said that until a just resolution of the plight of refugees can be reached in accordance with GA Res 194, the refugees are "the responsibility of the whole international community." He reiterated the claim that UNRWA's offices and staff have been targeted by the Israeli military. Sallouk noted that even with Lebanon's financial resources, it tried to assist Palestinian refugees. He expressed Lebanon's support for efforts to restart negotiations for a political solution to the conflict, but claimed that Israel has not been cooperative with efforts thus far.

¶ 10. (SBU) Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem said that the 60th anniversary of UNRWA underscored the fact that the Palestinian people had been suffering under great injustice since 1948. He stressed that no solution to the refugee problem has been reached as called for by GA Res 194, and that Israel, "the occupying power," is only making the situation more difficult by curtailing access to refugees and continuing to build settlements. He called for increased support for UNRWA, noting that Syria and other host countries face financial burdens from supporting the refugees. He called for the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem its capital and the return of the Golan Heights to Syria.

US Statement

¶ 11. (SBU) Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Eric Schwartz, noted in the U.S. statement that "In light of Israel's special role in facilitating UNRWA's mission, we deeply regret that Israel's request to publicly recognize UNRWA's efforts by speaking in this forum was not approved." The statement also reiterated strong U.S. support for UNRWA's mandate and work, including its contributions to the human development of the future Palestinian state. A/S Schwartz remarked that the U.S. is UNRWA's largest bilateral donor, with over \$260 million provided in 2009, and urged other donor governments, especially those from within the region, to provide contributions to UNRWA's General Fund. (The full text of the U.S. remarks, as well as several other countries' statements, can be found at:

<http://www.un.org/unrwa/newyork/praises.html> .

Panel Debate

¶ 12. (SBU) During the panel debate, held before the high-level speeches, Spanish Foreign Minister Moratinos highlighted Spain's contributions to Palestinian refugees and said that the time has come to establish a Palestinian state. UAE Minister of State Reem Al Hashimy called on the international community to force Israel to stop aggression against Palestinian refugee camps and remove blockades and closures, to reiterate the UN's responsibility towards the Palestinian refugees, and to double contributions to UNRWA. UNHCR Antonio Guterres spoke of UNRWA's unique mandate and said that it "does not make sense" to merge UNRWA and UNHCR given the differences between the organizations' mandates. Guterres stated that UNRWA's work has played an important

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role in showing, in a positive light, the work of the UN. UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes commended the work of UNRWA and called for opening the crossings between Israel and Gaza and said that the provision of humanitarian assistance should never be subject to political considerations. Rami Khouri, Director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy at the American University of Beirut, called for greater understanding of the foundation

of political Zionism, as a movement for "the opportunity to live a normal life" predating the Holocaust. Drawing a parallel to the aspirations of the Palestinian refugees to live normal lives, Khouri said "they (the refugees) are not going away."

¶13. (U) NEA DAS Connally amnd PRM/ANE have cleared this message.

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